

Sir Charles Montgomery
Director General
Border Force
Lunar House, 11th Floor Long Corridor
40 Wellesley Road
Croydon, CR9 2BY

11 May 2016

Cc: Minister of State, Home Office, Security & Immigration

Dear Sir Charles,

I am writing to you on behalf of the Airport Operators Association (AOA) and its members: i) to seek your reassurance that there will be enough Border Force (BF) resources to match the significant increase in passengers – with many UK airports experiencing double-digit growth – going through airport border halls in the summer months; and ii) to seek clarity on BF's longer-term 'transformation plan'.

You may recall that I wrote to you last year raising similar issues. Your reply accepted that there had been "marginal increases to average queue times in line with seasonal trends" and that in one case in one month an airport had not been "comfortably within service standards". You said then that you hoped that your response had been reassuring and confirmed that Border Force remains committed to "working to improve the customer experience with our partners".

So I am sorry to report that many of the AOA's airport members are again anxious about whether adequate resources will be deployed both this summer and in the longer term. Comments about long queues continue to feature prominently in customer complaints. I would therefore be grateful if you could give consideration to my comments below about resourcing, Service Level Agreements and service levels in border halls and e-gates, as well as four suggestions regarding responding to the concerns of UK airports.

Resourcing

Airports across the country are deeply concerned that, at a time when passenger numbers are rising substantially, the indicative budget for Border Force in 2016-17 is £558.1 million, a 0.4% reduction in overall resource spending compared to 2015-16. Whilst it is HM Treasury which allocates budgets, airports are also concerned that resourcing for the summer was only made known to them in late April, barely a couple of months before the high season.

Our members would assume that BF would know its budgets for summer resourcing earlier in the year than April, and would ask that in future years airports be made aware at a far earlier juncture, given that they plan their own resources and operations months and sometimes years ahead. Simply, BF cuts threaten to have a detrimental impact on manning in border halls this summer, a scenario which would deliver serious damage to the UK's international reputation and undermine the Government's "Welcome to the UK" agenda.

SLAs and service levels

In addition to the issue of resources and when they are known by airports, our members are concerned about Service Level Agreements (SLAs) and service levels in border halls. BF often cites a 99% SLA rate of 25 minutes for EEA and 45 minutes for non-EEA travellers nationally being met. Yet, airports feel they are an

ineffective measure and not reflective of customer service, to passengers or airports, in terms of the concern airports have regarding the experience travellers get whilst going through border halls.

It is clear from our airports that there are still excessive queues in border halls at times, and that they contribute to the dissatisfaction of passengers. There are questions about whether 'a common base level of service at all UK airports' is indeed being provided. Responsibility for policing the border rests with BF, who have a responsibility to pay for and deliver the commitments they have made.

There continue to be breaches of the SLAs on a regular basis. Our airports tell us that SLAs averaged over a 12 month period have little relevance for the majority of airports which experience large peaks on a seasonal and daily basis. And one has to ask whether, if 99% SLAs are being met as per BF figures, then the targets should be more ambitious. Airports are regularly criticised by passengers if there are long queues, unmanned desks, and a lack of communication as to the reasons for this; yet despite borders being BF's responsibility, it is airports which are held responsible by passengers and who often have to apologise to customers.

E-gates

We understand that longer-term BF is seeking to address the issue of passenger numbers growing whilst resources decline by relying on e-gates. E-gates are useful for processing low-risk profile, EU and Registered Traveller passengers, but only when an appropriate level of BF staffing can support them. E-gates should not be seen as a replacement for staff resources given there is an increased threat environment and 100% checks are required.

Asks

1. There needs to be an urgent review by BF and the Home Office as to whether: i) SLAs are an effective measure, reflective of customer service to passengers and airports, regardless of consistency of implementation; and ii) BF resources are adequate at UK airports for what we expect will be a record summer season.
2. While the AOA's representations are obviously driven by airport members' concerns about serious damage to customer service image, there are serious implications for UK plc more widely, in terms of inward investment, trade, tourism and the UK's overall reputation. Given BF's stated ambition to facilitate economic security as well as security of the border, members are seeking reassurance about the long-term ability of the Border Force to cope, given the scale of spending cuts that it is facing, when all the forecasts are that passenger numbers will continue to rise well ahead of DfT forecasts.
3. Members are seeking clarification from BF of its 'transformation plan', to ensure that long-term challenges are planned for and that airports do not have to go through the annual concern about resourcing. Airports want transparency and engagement on developing the plan, that should include a review of SLAs with the industry. Given the difficulty of ensuring BF performance does not decline, and the resourcing cuts still filtering through, airports really would like to see a clear and robust long-term plan for dynamic and flexible BF resourcing and management.
4. Finally, airports are seeking more analysis and management by BF on performance, so that it can explain why performance can improve in one period but then decline the next.

Yours sincerely,



Darren Caplan
Chief Executive